

TEACHER PREPARATION AND CERTIFICATION IN AGING: FROM BENIGN NEGLECT TO NEEDED ACTIONS

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Abstract:

Negative attitudes of children toward older persons are well documented in the literature, as is the influence of teachers in working with youth. Teachers whose preparation includes coursework in adult development and aging may be expected to incorporate life-span developmental concepts into classroom experiences to a greater extent than others. A survey of state departments of education was conducted to determine curriculum content related to adult development and aging in existing teacher preparation standards. Results indicate that few states require preparation in adult development and aging for teacher certification- This data has implications for policy makers, professional organizations, and curriculum planners.

Article:

The graying of America is well documented (Brotman, 1982; Butler & Lewis, 1983). The meaning of these demographic changes have been studied, and numerous attempts made to project and plan for changes in societal and individual needs. One implication of the increasing numbers of adults and older persons is that aging increasingly will be seen as a part of the life span rather than apart from the life span. As educational institutions continue to meet the challenge of preparing students for "life experiences," it is imperative that the totality of the life span be considered.

Few would argue that teachers are important influences in the lives of students, individually and collectively. Numerous studies have documented the prevalence of negative societal stereotypes about older persons (Butler, 1975; McTavish, 1971). Teachers, subject to the same biases as the society of which they are a part, may be expected to transmit their biases to students in both overt and covert manners, teacher influence could be but one of many variables contributing to the prevalence among children of negative attitudes toward older persons (Murphey, Myers, & Drennan, 1982; Nishi-Strattner & Myers, 1983; Page, Olivan, Driver, & Driver, 1981; Seefeldt, Jantz, Galper, & Serock, 1977). Alternatively, teachers could be important influences to help counter these negative attitudes and develop positive conceptions of age and the aging process among young persons.

To provide students with an awareness of positive aspects of aging and developmental issues across the life span, teachers and teacher educators themselves must have training in this area. The extent to which such training currently is incorporated into teacher preparation programs thus is a timely and relevant question.

The present study was undertaken to examine curriculum content related to adult development and aging in state teacher preparation and certification standards. The goal was to provide baseline data that could be useful in planning needed modifications to meet the changing needs of our society. Implications of the data are provided in terms of action steps for policy makers, professional organizations, and curriculum planners. Suggestions are made to enhance the availability of life-span developmental and aging concepts through integration into teacher preparation programs.

METHOD

A questionnaire regarding adult development and aging curriculum requirements in relation to state teacher certification standards was developed and mailed to the teacher education and certification coordinator in each

state department of education in the United States and its various territories (57 questionnaires mailed). Respondents were given four weeks to complete and return the two-page questionnaire.

The cover letter for the questionnaire drew attention to the increasing percentage of older persons in American society, and asked respondents to consider the extent to which young Americans are receiving education about the nation's changing demography and its implications. This explanation of the importance of the study was seen as necessary to engender the cooperation of respondents.

Respondents were asked to indicate the type of curriculum described in their standards for teacher certification, and to enclose a copy of the standards pertinent to the present study.

RESULTS

A total of 29 questionnaires was returned, representing a response rate of 52%. Seventeen (60%) of the respondents enclosed copies of all or part of the teacher certification requirements for their respective states.

The responses to the major questions asked in the study are shown in Table 1. As can be seen from this table, the overwhelming majority of respondents required child and adolescent development in their teacher preparation curricula (72% and 69%, respectively), and few required any curricula related to adult development. Only 3% of respondents required curricula dealing with midlife development, and 3% required training in the needs of older persons. The majority of states that responded did not require adult development (86%), life-span development (83%), or career development (63%) in their curricula. It is noteworthy that 3 of the 29 respondents (13%) did require life-span development and life-span career development for teacher certification.

Twenty-five states (93%) reported that no revisions to their curricula were planned in the foreseeable future (5-10 years) to incorporate life-span information into their preparation standards. Only two states (7%) reported that such revisions were in process. Only one of the states (3%) reported that institutions needed to include content on aging in their curricula in order to gain accreditation for their teacher education programs. Two states (7%) reported that teachers' needed to have some preparation relative to aging in order to gain state certification.

TABLE 1 Responses of State Departments of Education to Adult Development and Aging Curriculum Questionnaire: Do Your Standards for Teacher Preparation Include Content in the Following Areas?

Area	Response, n (%)			
	Required	Recommended	Some of both	Not addressed
Child development	21(72)	1(3)	5(17)	2(7)
Adolescent development	20(69)	1(3)	4(14)	4(14)
Adult development	3(10)	2(7)	2(7)	21(72)
Midlife development (ages 40-64)	1(3)	1(3)	1(3)	23(79)
Needs of older persons (ages 60+)	1(3)	1(3)	1(3)	24(83)
Life-span development (birth to death)	3(10)	1(3)	1(3)	24(83)
Life-span career development (birth to death, including retirement)	3(10)	0(0)	0(0)	24(83)

Note. N = 29.

All respondents (100%) indicated that local school districts were not required to include any curricular content about aging.

A content analysis of the state certification requirements and comments in regard to the questions asked indicated that the certification standards were not specific in regard to curricular content. Most noted that curricula in "child development" and/or "adolescent development" were required, while a few stated that "human growth and development" courses were part of the core requirements. The latter did not specify life-span development or concepts related to the needs of middle-aged and older adults. Rather, the preparation standards indicate that knowledge of developmental concepts as they affect teaching and learning are important information for teachers.

Respondents also were asked to describe how their respective states deal with the topic of aging. Sixteen of the 29 respondents commented. Most indicated that this was a matter for local decision making, and that other social service agencies in their states had primary responsibility for addressing the needs of adults.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A questionnaire sent to state teacher education and certification officers indicated that few states currently require prospective teachers to receive academic preparation concerning America's increasingly aging population. Respondents were asked to describe pertinent content in their standards. Sixty percent of the states responded to the questionnaire, and many of them sent copies of or excerpts from their curriculum standards. While most said that teachers are required to have preparation in child and adolescent development, almost none requires comparable content on the adult years and aging. Of the respondents, 100% indicated that local districts are not required to include content about aging in their curricula, and 93% reported that no curriculum changes are anticipated in their teacher preparation curricula in the foreseeable future.

While the percentage of the aging population is rising to significant and unprecedented levels, prospective teachers do not seem to be getting preparation that would enable them to teach their students about older persons and the aging process. Moreover, teachers are not prepared to explain the aging population's impact on a wide range of conditions that affect all. Only one state reported that its institutions must have content on aging in order to receive state accreditation.

Major steps are indicated to change the current level of benign neglect in state requirements for institutional accreditation and for individual teacher certification. Needed changes should motivate local school districts to incorporate content on aging. The states should take direct actions to get districts to incorporate the topic into their curricula. The federal government also has a role to play. Other key players include professional groups, the media, and publishers of relevant content for elementary through graduate school. The efforts needed will have to be pioneering ones, granted the level of neglect suggested by the current exploratory data from a large number of states.

The data in this study suggest a number of actions that should be taken to catch up with current realities and to prepare for further dramatic changes in America's demography—the graying of our people. Some specific but not exhaustive examples of actions follows.

At the K-12 grade levels: (1) Include content that promotes an understanding and appreciation of aging and the role of the mature population, that shows how aging affects economics, health care, and most of the nation's well-being; (2) incorporate older persons into school programs as resources to assure that young persons have productive interactions with senior citizens; and (3) incorporate older persons into local school politics to encourage those persons to see their continuing stake in strong schooling.

At the collegiate level: (1) Broaden educational psychology courses to have them reflect life-span developmental concepts, and include all ages in studies of learning styles; (2) incorporate some adult education training in the preparation of all prospective educators; and (3) include some senior adult considerations in all

content and methods courses and laboratory experiences (a way to prepare all educators to serve as education leaders, not just K-12 teachers and administrator).

At the state level: (1) Incorporate studies of mature citizens into requirements for accreditation and certification; (2) stimulate awareness of issues and alternatives through conferences; and (3) provide financial incentives to local districts to incorporate curricular responses to changing demographic patterns.

At the federal level: (1) Use the government's power to dramatize and to act on the issues; (2) incorporate incentives for local and state agencies and institutions relative to the aging population; and (3) fund national research and demonstration projects to determine the best means to address the existing and future issues. Among pertinent professional associations and the media: Stimulate (1) interest, (2) research, and (3) action on a wide range of issues related to life span development and aging, including both the problems and the promises.

Among the publishers and other creators of instructional aides: (1) Incorporate a balanced treatment of older persons in materials for students and instructors; (2) publish articles and books on the relevant topics; (3) encourage information storage and retrieval systems to assure an adequate information base; and (4) provide information on the wide range of problems and contributions that older persons bring to societal and daily living issues.

Among special interest groups that promote civil rights and education equity: Study the unique needs, problems, and contributions of older members in relation to (1) gender, (2) race, (3) ethnicity, (4) religion, and (5) class.

CONCLUSION

In undertaking an exploratory study of state certification and accreditation patterns relative to life-span development and aging, the assumption was made that aging had relatively low priority in state requirements. The data collected in this study strengthen this assumption. The conclusions of this study included specific recommendations for selected institutions, agencies, organizations, and enterprises. The demographic data on our aging population is undeniable: The nation is changing dramatically in age distribution. The time has come for some far-reaching actions throughout American life. This study has dealt only with education implications, where there is a mind-boggling action agenda awaiting clear conceptualization, extensive research, and lots of action!

Teachers prepared as recommended here would be capable of incorporating pertinent content relating to life-span developmental issues into elementary-secondary curricula. If adequately reflect needs and contributions of the nation's aging population, there must be a major change in attitudes and actions of a number of institutions, agencies, organizations, and enterprises. This study suggests a number of urgently needed and significant actions.

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